

COASTAL FEATURES

July - 1992

The Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council's Report on Current Events

George L. Sisson, Jr., Chairman
Grover J. Fugate, CRMC Executive Director

THE PAWCATUCK RIVER ESTUARY AND LITTLE NARRAGANSETT BAY INTERSTATE MANAGEMENT PLAN TO BE ADOPTED

At its July 14th meeting, the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) is scheduled to vote on making The Pawcatuck River Estuary and Little Narragansett Bay; An Interstate Management Plan part of the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Program. The process involved the enlistment of a citizens' advisory committee to assist in developing an issues list which reflected public concerns about the estuary. Development and research of these issues involved the collection of data regarding past and current land use and development trends, water quality status, critical wildlife habitats, recreational patterns of use, and the development of new investigations conducted by the project's staff. This overview will trace the origins of the plan and its progression.

THE ORIGIN OF THE PLAN

The need for an interstate management plan for the Pawcatuck River Estuary and Little Narragansett Bay manifested itself in several ways. The first was the constant concern for the estuary of local residents, which provided for the continuous pressure on government agencies to assess the changes occurring within the area, and to question the adequacy of programs and policies that were in place to protect the resource. Secondly, the surge of development in coastal New England during the 1980's pushed concerns about the impacts of this growth upon the estuary to the forefront of the regulatory agenda. Finally, the impacts of a marina dredging project in 1987 on the returning Atlantic salmon highlighted the ineffectiveness of interstate coordination during such projects, and the need for common policies concerning the use of the estuary.

In the spring of 1989 efforts began to initiate an interstate planning project with the aim of detailing management strategies through a plan tailored to the estuary. Following a series of roundtable discussions sponsored by the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association, the Connecticut Department of

Protection, Office of the Long Island Sound Program, and the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council, funds were successfully sought from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Office of Coastal Resources Management (OCRM) for the development of the plan. The project had three overall goals:

- 1) To evaluate the current uses and status of resources within the estuary and to encourage the establishment of a sustainable level and mix of uses consistent with the paramount consideration of protection of the estuary's natural and cultural resources;
- 2) To facilitate and establish consistent goals and policies between the states and municipalities for the future management and development of the estuary and its resources;
- 3) To develop formal coordinating mechanisms for the implementation of the agreed upon goals and policies through the future project reviews and programs.

At the beginning of the project a Citizens' Advisory Committee (CAC) was appointed to assist the state agency personnel in the development of the plan. The CAC developed an issues list to reflect public concerns about the estuary. The issues identified were subsequently organized under of five categories: Water Quality; Habitat Protection and Restoration; Recreational Uses; Public Access, Open Space and Protection of Scenic Quality; and Coordination of Management Programs. A complete characterization of these subject areas was documented through collation and summarization of available research, as well as new studies conducted by project staff. This information is contained in a series of technical reports which are supporting documents for this plan. From these technical reports, past and present problems were evaluated and goals, policies and management strategies were developed for the plan.

THE REGION

For regulatory purposes the region included in the interstate management plan includes the common boundary of the Pawcatuck River and estuary. The estuary forms where the freshwater of the Pawcatuck River mixes with the saltwater of the Block Island Sound. Bordered by the towns of Stonington, Connecticut, on the west and Westerly, Rhode Island on the east, the estuary includes Little Narragansett Bay and extends upstream from the mouth of the river to the Stillmanville Dam in Westerly.

The Pawcatuck River estuary is a highly stratified estuary, with a layer of freshwater originating from the Pawcatuck River riding over a saline bottom water layer which originates in Block Island Sound. The estuarine portion of the river is 8 km long, and begins at the Stillmanville Street bridge.

Little Narragansett Bay, which is a two-square mile estuary at the mouth of the river, averages 2m in depth, covers 3.2km², and is generally a well mixed salt water bay.

THE GOALS OF THE PLAN

Each of the issues in the Interstate Management Plan identifies certain area goals:

A. Water Quality

1) To protect existing water quality, to prevent its degradation by existing and new uses of the estuary, and to work to improve water quality by reneidation of existing pollution sources.

B. Habitat Protection and Restoration

1) To protect aquatic and shoreline areas of significant value, and where possible restore presently degraded areas of potentially significant resource values;

such areas include viable shellfish areas, important migratory and resting areas for migratory birds.

2) To ensure that the policies and regulations of the states and municipalities protect aquatic and shoreline areas and resources of significant value from alterations, either in-water, along the shoreline, or inland which may adversely impact those areas of resources.

3) To coordinate the policies and regulations of the states and municipalities to provide maximum protection of living resources and critical habitat areas.

C. Recreational Uses

1) To maintain a balance among the diverse activities which coexist within the estuary, and to accommodate the changing characteristics of traditional activities and the development of new water-dependent uses in keeping with the principle of preservation and restoration of the ecological systems.

2) To ensure that marina development occurs in appropriate areas, and to implement innovative solutions to increased demands for moorings, dockage and storage space.

3) To ensure that the cumulative level of marina development within the estuary does not degrade water quality, exceed the capacity of shoreside facilities to support it, create unsafe levels of boating use or impact or degrade the natural resources of the estuary, including its scenic beauty.

D. Public Access, Open Space, and Enhancement of Scenic Value

1) To expand physical and visual public access to the estuary.

2) To preserve, protect, and, where possible, restore the scenic values of the estuary by retaining the visual diversity and unique visual characteristics of the water areas and shoreline.

RATIONALE

E. Coordination of Management Programs

1) To integrate municipal land use policies with considerations for use and protection of the estuary.

2) Evaluate inconsistencies between state and local programs, and between state programs as regards the use, development and management of the estuary and its resources and to establish common policies and restrictions on allowable uses, evaluation procedures, in-water restrictions and decision-making processes between the management authorities.

3) To provide the most complete and accurate information base possible for all levels of government and the public to use in management decisions and activities affecting coastal resources.

DEVELOPING THE DRAFT

The Pawcatuck Project was coordinated by Timothy Dillingham, of the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), and Marybeth Hart of the Connecticut Department Protection's Office of the Long Island Sound Program. Initial drafts of the Interstate Management Plan were Prepared by Timothy Dillingham, Rush Abrams, and Jeffrey Willis of the CRMC and Alan Desbonnet of URI's Coastal Resources Center. After several revisions, the citizens' Advisory Committee approved a final draft which was presented to the Westerly Town Council and the Stonington Board of Selectman. The development process lasted almost three years.

The region of the Pawcatuck River and Little Narragansett Bay is not only the meeting ground of the ocean and the freshwater, but of increasing use pressures and unique and valuable coastal resources. The estuary is the center of a rapidly growing recreational boating industry, which includes substantial marina and transient harbor development. Extensive shoreline development and conversion to residential use is beginning to supplant many undeveloped shore areas and to heighten concerns about the protection of coastal resources such as wetlands. The difficulty of managing the many uses and resources of the Pawcatuck River and Little Narragansett Bay is compounded by the interstate nature of the waterbody, subject to different management structures and program policies. Furthermore, the management process becomes more complicated by the numerous regulatory and management authorities involved on the federal, state, and local levels in both Rhode Island and Connecticut.

The fundamental purpose of the Interstate Management Plan is to establish a cooperative process that would preserve, protect, develop, and where possible, restore the resources of the Pawcatuck River and Little Narragansett Bay.

Those wishing to comment on articles in
Coastal Features
are invited to do so. Please send to:

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